

Christianity as Philosophy: Problems and Perspectives of an Ancient Intellectual Project

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Abstract

The article explores the profile, context and consequences of Christianity's self definition as a philosophy in the ancient world. It proposes a distinction between, on the one hand, the practice of teaching philosophy in small Christian schools, and, on the other hand, an intellectual discourse that proclaimed Christianity as the true and superior philosophy. It is argued that Christianity's self definition as a philosophy should not be viewed as merely an accommodation to an intellectual fashion. It is shown how Christianity could be understood and practised as a philosophy in the ancient sense of the word. However, as a philosophical practice Christianity underwent a transformation in the 4th century which prevented the emergence of a late antique Christian scholasticism and gave rise to new combinations of Christianity and non-Christian philosophy.

Keywords

Augustine, Origen, philosophy, Christian schools, Platonism, Gnosticism

I

In 232 or 233, Theodore, a young man from Neocaesarea (province of Pontus in Asia Minor) arrived in Caesarea, the capital of the province of Palestine. Some time before, the governor of Palestine had appointed Theodore's future brother-in-law as his counsellor and ordered him to Caesarea.¹ Theodore had travelled to Caesarea in the company of his sister, his

¹) This is the revised text of an evening lecture held at the International Patristic Conference in Oxford on August 8th, 2007. For questions, comments and the occasional reference I am grateful to the audience and particularly to the chairman on that evening,

brother Athenodorus, and a soldier as a military escort. Everything seemed to come together: For Theodore who was on his way to Berytos (today's Beirut) the journey to Caesarea was only a welcome detour. Berytos was attractive as a place of Roman culture, and began to acquire a reputation as a centre for legal studies.² At home, at the instigation of his mother, a widow, Theodore had already studied rhetoric. One of his teachers had taught him some Latin, and—since Latin was the language of law—had also introduced him to the study of Roman law. Moreover, friends and relatives suggested to Theodore that he may improve his career prospects by pursuing his law studies elsewhere. The period of study in Roman Berytos was meant to immerse the young man in Roman law and culture and thus provide the finishing touches for his legal education and to launch him on a promising career.

But something went wrong. Instead of spending an enjoyable holiday in Caesarea before moving on to Berytos and his future, Theodore stayed on. Five years would pass before he eventually left Caesarea.³ The young man had succumbed to the influence of a new and charismatic teacher of philosophy, a man who had recently had to leave Alexandria under a cloud. This is how Theodore evokes from hindsight his first encounter with Origen, the Christian philosopher—Theodore here sounds a bit like a starstruck teenager:

He received us right on the first day—because this was my real first day in Caesarea, it was, so to say, the most precious day of all my days, when for the first time the true sun was rising above me . . . He showered philosophy and her lovers with all due praise and he claimed that only those who do the right thing lead a life which is fitting for rational beings. In order to do so they first have to know

Professor Richard Sorabji, and to the editors of *Vigiliae Christianae*.—The details of the following account are sifted from the 'Thanksgiving Address' of Gregory the Wonderworker for his teacher Origen. For the Address I use H. Crouzel's edition: *Grégoire le Thaumaturge, Remerciement à Origène; la lettre d' Origène à Grégoire*. Texte grec, introduction, traduction et notes par Henri Crouzel S.J., Sources Chrétiennes 148 (Paris 1969). See Gregory, *Address* V, 48-72.

² See F. Millar, 'The Roman Coloniae of the Near East: A Study of Cultural Relations', in: H. Solin / M. Kajava (eds), *Roman Eastern Policy and Other Studies* (Helsinki 1990) 7-57: 16-17. See also: L.J. Hall, *Roman Berytus. Beirut in Late Antiquity* (London 2004).

³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *h.e.* 6, 30. I see no need to follow P. Nautin, *Origène. Sa vie et son oeuvre* (Paris 1977), 83-85, and question the attribution of the *Address* to Gregory the Wonderworker.

themselves, then the truly good things human beings should pursue and the truly bad things they should avoid...⁴

Origen's invitation to philosophy, his *logos protreptikos*, was attuned to Theodore's personal situation, a young man still uncertain of his future. Theodore writes:

Many people (Origen continued) behave like irrational animals, blind with regard to their intellect they do not know who they are, they are ignorant and unwilling to learn what is good or bad, they dart and fly towards riches, towards those reputations and honours the crowd can offer, towards bodily health, as if all these things were the supreme good. They set great, even unique store by these false goods and they value those professions and ways of life that can procure them, the military, the bar, the study of law.⁵

Theodore was moved by this direct appeal to realize his true rational self but he still hesitated. In the end he had to yield to Origen's eloquent ardour and—most importantly—to his offer of a philosophical friendship:

As if a spark had hit our soul right in the centre, the deep love for this holy and most desirable word (...) and for this friendly man, its herold, was lit and set ablaze...

Wounded by his love I was persuaded to neglect all business, all plans for study that seemed to be so fitting for me, yes, even the study of my beautiful laws, and also my birth place and the relatives, those who are here and those with whom we had travelled. There was only one thing left which I loved and desired: Philosophy and the one who introduced me to it, this divine man.⁶

A protreptic exhortation to philosophy, an invitation to a wholly rational and wholly virtuous way of life, the offer of a philosophical friendship, uniting the disciple with his teacher and spiritual guide—Theodore is clearly rehearsing the customary protocol every self respecting school of ancient philosophy would observe in one way or another. Theodore, who was later called Gregory (or: Gregory the Wonderworker) evokes these initiatory steps in his *Thanksgiving Address to Origen* where he recalls the five years of study he spent with the Christian philosopher from Alexandria.

⁴) *Address*, VI, 73-75.

⁵) *Address*, VI, 76-77.

⁶) *Ibidem*, VI, 83-84.

(His brother Athenodorus—who is mentioned only by Eusebius of Caesarea⁷—had probably joined him in his studies).

At the time of its composition and probable delivery, perhaps in 238 C.E., Theodore was about to leave Caesarea and the school of Origen. He would, after all, not become a philosopher. Instead, he prepared himself to exchange the freedom of the philosophical life for the drudgery of a legal career, or, as he put it, ‘public performances, court sessions, crowds, pompousness.’⁸ For Theodore studying philosophy with Origen did not yet mean giving up on his—or his mother’s—career plans. Origen had persuaded him only to take up the study of philosophy, not to wear the philosopher’s cloak for the rest of his life. And for all his professed aversion to vain eloquence, Theodore had clearly not forgotten how to compose a beautiful speech.

Theodore was probably not much different from other young men of the educated elite who had the time and the money to add the study of philosophy to their education in rhetoric. There were no exams, no agreed standards, no academic degrees or honours. But a philosophical education could add to one’s cultural prestige, to one’s social capital. Like the study of rhetoric—only more so—the study of philosophy conferred cultural competence and could signal membership in the cultural elite.⁹ This enhanced intellectual and social prestige of philosophy radiated to other disciplines and beyond: In the introduction to his *Institutiones* Ulpian claimed that law scholars like him were, in effect, the true philosophers.¹⁰ And Galen, physician and philosopher, wrote a treatise with the title *That the best physician is also a philosopher* (*Quod optimus medicus sit quoque philosophus*).¹¹ Moreover, the representation of philosophical teaching plays a great role in the funerary art that was commissioned in the 3rd and early

⁷ Eusebius, *h.e.* 6, 30.

⁸ Ibidem, XVI, 192.

⁹ See G. Stroumsa, *La Fin du Sacrifice* (Paris 2005) 205–207.

¹⁰ Ulpian, apud *Digesta I, 1* (ed. T. Mommsen 1). See M. Bretone, *Geschichte des römischen Rechts* (München 1998) 263–264.

¹¹ Ed. Kühn, vol. I, 53–63. For the teaching of philosophy in the High Empire, see I. Hadot, *Der philosophische Unterrichtsbetrieb in der römischen Kaiserzeit*, in: *Rheinisches Museum* 146 (2003) 49–71. For the encyclopaedic tendency of the Platonic schools and the corresponding plausibility of their claim to offer a good education even to those who did not wish to become professional philosophers, see M. Baltes, ‘Was ist antiker Platonismus?’, in: *Studia Patristica* 24 (Leuven 1993) 219–238: 235–236.

4th century. Paul Zanker¹² and Björn Ewald¹³ have more recently explored this aspect of the cult of learning.

Despite the social prestige of philosophy, its institutional context tended to be rather weak and volatile: Schools were usually small, often only a master and a handful of disciples. In some schools an inner circle of serious students (such as Theodore) distinguished itself from a larger circle of occasional hearers. Most schools did not survive the death of their head. Most teachers of philosophy were paid for neither by a city nor by the emperor; rather—if they did not have some private income or pursued another profession besides (such as grammarian, rhetor, or physician, for example)—they were dependent on rich sponsors and on the contributions of their well to do disciples. Money was but rarely mentioned—it would have dispelled the impression of relentless high-mindedness the practitioners of ancient philosophy were keen to cultivate. In this respect, too, Theodore's speech sticks to the conventions. Origen's career shows the various options for a ancient philosopher to support himself: After his well-to-do father had died in a persecution when he was still seventeen, a rich Christian lady apparently took him into her house where—or so Eusebius of Caesarea likes to emphasize—he had to put up with the presence of a Antiochene heretic called Paul.¹⁴ Later on he had supported himself by doubling as a teacher of *grammatikoi logoi*, before selling his library in order to be paid a regular stipend. Origen's school in Caesarea was probably supported by a certain Ambrose, a rich patron who had once belonged to the followers of the second century Gnostic Valentinus.¹⁵

If philosophy as a discipline lacked a sharply defined role and an agreed content in the fragmented and socially stratified educational system of the Roman Empire, this defect was somewhat compensated for by the attempts of some philosophical schools to establish ambitious curricula. Theodore tells us how he was lead through successive stages of a strictly prescribed course of study.

¹² P. Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates. The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity* (Berkeley etc. 1995) 267-330.

¹³ B.C. Ewald, *Der Philosoph als Leitbild. Ikonographische Untersuchungen an römischen Sarkophagreliefs* (Mainz 1999).

¹⁴ Eusebius, *h.e.* 6,2,13.—Lucian of Samosata, in his famous satire *On Salaried Posts in Great Houses*, evokes with evident relish the indignities which those had to suffer who were kept by the rich as their domestic philosophers.

¹⁵ Eusebius, *h.e.* 6,2,15; 6,3,8-9; 6,18,1; 6,23,1; *Suda*, ed. Adler, vol. III, 621,13-25. See P. Nautin, *Lettres et écrivains chrétiens de II^e et III^e siècles* (Paris 1961) 250-253.

First he was taught dialectics in order to enable him to distinguish true from specious arguments. Then he was instructed in the natural sciences, astronomy and geometry, in order to transform the irrational wonder about the universe into a rational admiration for the maker of the universe. After physics followed ethics, whose goal is to acquaint the soul with itself and to perfect the disciple in the virtues, not only the four cardinal virtues of wisdom, temperance, prudence and fortitude, but also patience and—as the mother of all virtues—piety. The curriculum reached its climax with theology which was meant to explore the ultimate cause of the universe. Here first the opinions of Greek philosophers and poets were subjected to close scrutiny before the master gave access to true theology by explaining the oracles of God and his prophets as contained in scripture.¹⁶

Combining both Stoic and Platonic elements, Origen's curriculum followed—as has been noticed by Clemens Scholten—a psychagogic rationale:¹⁷ It is the soul which is the focus on all levels of instruction, it is by attending to the soul that the disciple is lead to the goal of fully realizing his human potential, his rational essence or—as Theodore put it—'to become in his purified mind like God and to approach God and to abide in him.'¹⁸ The educative process is explicitly guided by the Delphic maxim 'Know yourself' (*Gnôthi seauton*)—Origen's school promised to convey a knowledge of self that leads to knowledge of God.¹⁹ In this respect Origen's school resembles the contemporary schools of Plotinus and his disciple Porphyry; Porphyry devoted a whole treatise to the Delphic maxim.²⁰ This focus on the realization of self knowledge also seems to be the reason why Origen taught ethics after the natural sciences: The soul of the disciple is to be led from the outside to the inside, to the true inner self, the rational part of the soul.²¹

¹⁶) *Address* VII, 93-XV, 183. The best analysis is provided by C. Scholten, 'Psychagogischer Unterricht bei Origenes', in: *Hairesis. Festschrift für Karl Hoheisel zum 65. Geburtstag*, in: *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, Ergänzungsband 34 (Münster 2002) 261-280.

¹⁷) See Scholten's article cited in the preceding note.

¹⁸) *Address* XII, 149.

¹⁹) *Address* XI, 141 f. See Plato, *Philebus* 48 C.

²⁰) The fragments are collected by A. Smith, *Porphyrius. Fragmenta*, BSGRT (Stuttgart / Leipzig 1993) 308-313.

²¹) Compare M. Baltes, 'Was ist antiker Platonismus?', in: *Studia Patristica* 24 (Leuven 1993) 219-238: 237 who argues that the *telos* of ancient Platonic philosophy was not so much *eudaimonia* as the realization of one's true self ('Selbstfindung, Selbstverwirklichung,

We still lack a comprehensive study of the curricula of the institutions of higher learning in Antiquity, their theory and, most importantly, their practice. The comparatively early testimony offered by Theodore's *Address* is clearly very precious. For example, the more or less contemporary school of Plotinus does not seem to have adopted a similar curriculum. But perhaps Plotinus was, as in other respects, the exception, not the rule: Some of the Platonic schools of the 2nd and 3rd century must have prescribed a course of study. The so called *Prologos* of the Platonist Albinos (probably the written version of a lecture of his teacher Gaios), carefully discusses the order in which the Platonic dialogues should be studied. Two courses of study are suggested: The shorter course comprises only four Platonic dialogues and leads from the Alcibiades (which is read as a kind of protreptic) to the Timaios (which is read as a piece of Platonic theology).²² Later, in the early 4th century, this shorter course of study was developed and expanded by Iamblichus, who established the reading curriculum for the Neoplatonic schools.²³

Did Theodore—who, when writing his *Address* was apparently already a Christian—endanger his career prospects, or worse, his life, by receiving his training in philosophy from the Christian teacher Origen? Was not Christianity outlawed at the time? If Theodore had reason to be afraid, he does not care to mention it.

The prologue to Theodore's *Address* articulates the typical ideology of the Second Sophistic: Sincere loyalty to the empire, its laws and institutions is here combined with proper pride in the unquestioned superiority of Greek language and culture. In a very revealing passage Theodore rehearses the usual praise of the superior qualities of Roman law (it is, he says, wise, precise, nuanced, wholly admirable), only to come to the conclusion that Roman Law is, in brief, 'supremely Greek' (*hellenikotatos*).²⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea wants us to believe that with the school of Origen the

Selbsterlösung'). The philosophical teacher became a spiritual guide, see G. Stroumsa, *La fin du sacrifice* (Paris 2005) 189-214. Stroumsa claims that the Talmudic sage fulfilled a similar function.

²² See B. Reis, *Der Platoniker Albinos und sein sogenannter Prologos*, Serta Graeca 3 (Wiesbaden 1999).

²³ See Anonymus, *Prolegomena tês Platônos philosophias* 26 (L.G. Westerink / J. Trouillard / A. Ph. Segonds, *Prologomènes à la philosophie de Platon* (Paris 1990) 39 [with note 215 on p. 75]).

²⁴ *Address* I, 7. See M. Rizzi, *Gregorio il Taumaturgo (?)*, *Encomio di Origene* (Milan 2002) 32-37.

study of Christian philosophy had moved upmarket and therefore had become a serious option for educated young men from the Eastern Empire. Eusebius assures us that already in Alexandria ‘many other cultured persons’²⁵ flocked to Origen’s school. Marco Rizzi has pointed out that the probable exaggeration of this phrase only matches the boast of Porphyry that in mid 3rd century Rome his teacher Plotinus drew ‘many hearers’ ‘who were brought together by a real enthusiasm for philosophy’.²⁶ To some degree philosophers had become the licensed outsiders of Roman society; their learning and their ascetic life style set them somewhat apart and inspired awe and reverence. Origen was famously invited by an emperor’s mother,²⁷ Porphyry suggests that Plotinus had close ties to the emperor’s court.²⁸ If polite Roman society were to accept Christianity at all, it probably had least difficulties to recognise ascetic philosophers like Origen who taught Christianity as a way of life.

If all this seems sufficiently to account for Theodore’s apparent lack of concern about his teacher’s Christianity, there is still the disturbing fact that nowhere in his *Address* Theodore invokes the name of Jesus Christ or uses the term ‘Christianity’. Accident? A lack of theological interest? The constrictions of the literary genre? Or rather: necessary camouflage? We do not know.²⁹

²⁵) Eusebius, *h.e.* 6,18,1.

²⁶) Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 7 (transl. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library). See M. Rizzi, *Gregorio il Taumaturgo (?): Encomio di Origene* (Milan 2002), 73 (with further parallels).

²⁷) Eusebius, *h.e.* 6,21,3.

²⁸) Plotinus hoped to use his good standing with the emperor Gallienus and his wife Salonnina for his project of re-establishing a philosophers’ city in Campania. His plans were, however, thwarted by opponents at the emperor’s court, see Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 12. Some scepticism regarding the alleged closeness of Plotinus to successive emperors is expressed by M. Edwards, ‘Plotinus and the Emperors’, in: *Symbolae Osloenses* 69 (1994) 137-147. Ostentatious interest in the activities of celebrity philosophers like Origen or Plotinus was also meant to enhance the prestige of the emperors and their court. There is still a monograph to be written on the cultural politics and policies of Roman emperors.

²⁹) But see M. Tardieu, ‘Les Gnostiques dans la Vie de Plotin’, in: L. Brisson et alii (eds), *Porphyre. La vie de Plotin, vol. II: Études d’introduction etc* (Paris 1992) 503-546: 510. Tardieu observes that in the 3rd century, Christians avoided to call themselves ‘Christian’; the name belonged to the ‘langage coercitif ou railleur de leurs adversaires, juges ou intellectuels.’

II

The *Address* offers a rare window on the implementation of arguably one of the most ambitious intellectual projects of Antiquity: to conceive of Christianity as the new, and the uniquely true philosophy.

To speak about Ancient Christianity's self definition as a philosophy is to enter a particularly difficult and complex debate. Some scholars explore the scope and meaning of this self definition by collecting those passages from the church fathers where Christianity is defined as the true philosophy. For the Greek Fathers we are still admirably served by the thoroughgoing study of Anne-Marie Malingrey.³⁰ A purely lexicographical approach, however, has clearly its severe limitations—the word *philosophia* covers a whole range of meanings. And Origen, for example,—to judge from the extant remains of his oeuvre—by and large prefers to apply the term *philosophia* to the traditional Greek schools of philosophy.³¹

For some scholars, Ancient Christianity's self definition as a philosophy expresses something important about the very essence of Ancient Christianity.

About a hundred years ago, Adolf v Harnack developed his influential and complex view of ancient Christianity as a *complexio oppositorum*, a syncretistic religion that embraced all the religious tendencies and antagonisms of the ancient world in their most highly developed form.³² Taking his cue from F.D.E. Schleiermacher, Harnack defined Ancient Christianity as 'religion itself'; compared to Christianity all the other cults of the Roman Empire represented only poor and half developed versions of religion. Harnack pointed out that for the apologists, as for Clement of Alexandria and Origen, Christianity is at the same time a divine revelation and pure reason, the true philosophy. These Christian teachers, propagating a kind of Christian enlightenment, believed that the whole contents of Christianity can be reconstructed by reason. They did so by identifying the Logos, the active principle of the world, of reason and of ethics, with a historic person, with Jesus Christ.

³⁰ A.-M. Malingrey, *Philosophia. Étude d'un groupe des mots dans la littérature grecque des Présocratiques au IV^e siècle après J.-C.* (Paris 1961).

³¹ Ibidem, 159-184.

³² For the following sketch of Harnack's position I conflate ideas culled from: A. Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums* (Leipzig 1924) 327-328; *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte. Erster Band: Die Entstehung des kirchlichen Dogmas*, Tübingen 1909 = Darmstadt 1964) 496-550; *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Reprint (Gütersloh 1977) 115-130.

Harnack's broad historical perspective is fully alert to the boldness and ambition of Christianity's self definition as a philosophy. According to him, it was Origen who formulated a Christian philosophy that marked the climax of the Hellenistic philosophy of religion. If Christianity embraced the full spectrum of the history of ancient religions, Christianity as philosophy represented the highest form of ancient religious philosophy. Harnack believed that the fact that Christianity presented itself as a philosophy transformed Christianity itself. It became something to be taught, a knowledge and a doctrine, something complicated and fully comprehensible only to the educated. For Harnack this development was both historically necessary and deeply problematical. For Harnack, then, the self definition of Christianity as a philosophy represented an ambitious self positioning of Christianity within the religious and intellectual landscape of Late Antiquity.

The most recent phase of the debate about Christianity's self definition as a philosophy has been enormously helped by a renewed interest in the larger project of ancient philosophy. In numerous publications, Pierre Hadot has reminded us of the original purpose of ancient philosophy: It was not only a theoretical system of arguments and doctrines (philosophy as a discourse) but also an introduction to a way of life (philosophy as a *mode de vie*).³³ According to Hadot, ancient philosophy proposed spiritual exercises in order to inculcate the right view of man and man's position in the larger reality, the universe that encompasses man. In this way, ancient philosophy aimed at transforming the disciple's self into a wholly rational and virtuous being. Ancient philosophy was practised in small groups, in intense communities, it combined theory and practice, intellectual argument and spiritual exercises, and in this way promised to lead its disciples to the goal of *eudaimonia*. Hadot's precise and nuanced historical explorations wish to reconstruct a tradition of philosophical practice that was more exciting and ambitious than much of the theoretical philosophy taught as an academic subject in modern Western universities.

Moreover, Hadot pointed out that the terminology and the jargon of the spiritual exercises of ancient philosophy was adopted by a few Christian authors who must have received some kind of philosophical education—Hadot lists Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Evagrius Ponticus and Dorotheus of Gaza.³⁴ For Hadot,

³³) Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que c'est la philosophie antique?* (Paris 1995).

³⁴) Pierre Hadot, *Philosophie als Lebensform. Geistige Übungen in der Antike* (Berlin 1991) 48–65.

Ancient Christianity's ambitious self definition as a philosophy was true, in so far as it continued this tradition of philosophical exercises. To a certain extent, however, Christianity also plays the villain in Hadot's piece. It was Christianity, Hadot claimed, that reduced philosophy to a merely theoretical discipline by assigning to her the role of a servant of theology. According to Hadot, this demise of the original project of ancient philosophy was finally completed in the universities of medieval Western Europe.³⁵

I believe that the contributions of both Harnack and Hadot allow us to seize on important elements of the project of conceiving Christianity as a philosophy and thus allow us to attempt a provisional definition: On the one hand we are dealing here with an ambitious self definition that allowed Christianity to conceptualize itself and its relation to the religious and intellectual environment of Late Antiquity. On the other hand we find an intellectual practice that was practised in small schools of Christian philosophy.

In this way one can distinguish, so to say, between the red-hot centre of ancient Christian philosophy and its luminous radiance—i.e. between, on the one hand, the intellectual and educative practice in intense scholarly communities, and, on the other hand, a more general discourse on Christianity as a true philosophy, radiating from the centre into other institutional and intellectual contexts.

III

I would like to suggest that Origen's schools of Christian philosophy first in Alexandria and then in Caesarea, were only the latest and arguably most important in a line of Christian schools and Christian teachers reaching back for more than 100 years to the beginning of the 2nd century.³⁶ I have argued in several publications that some of those Christian theologians

³⁵ Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que c'est la philosophie antique*, 381–387.—More recently Theo Kobusch, surveying the whole history of Western philosophy, has claimed that ancient Christian philosophy developed a 'metaphysics of the inner man' or a 'practical metaphysics' and in this way exercised an enormous influence on the whole of Western philosophy. (*Christliche Philosophie. Die Entdeckung der Subjektivität* (Darmstadt 2006).)

³⁶ For these schools, see U. Neymeyr, *Die christlichen Lehrer im zweiten Jahrhundert. Ihre Lehrtätigkeit, ihr Selbstverständnis und ihre Geschichte* (Vigiliae Christianae Supplements 4; Leiden—Köln 1989).

that are now commonly labelled as ‘Gnostics’ or ‘Christian Gnostics’, were also masters Christian philosophy in this sense.³⁷

In the first quarter of the 2nd century we meet first Basilides and his son Isidore who were Christian teachers in Alexandria. Then, shortly afterwards, in Rome and elsewhere, Valentinus and his host of disciples, among them Ptolemy and Herakleon, appear.³⁸ Again in Rome, towards the middle of the 2nd century, we find Justin Martyr. About the same time we encounter Carpocrates and his disciples, first in Alexandria, then in Rome where they were presumably housed by a certain Marcellina. Later, in Rome at the end of the 2nd century, there are Theodotus the banker and Theodotus the cobbler.³⁹ In Alexandria, there were Pantaenus and Clement, both were probably engaged also in teaching. Others—such as Bardaisan of Edessa⁴⁰—could be mentioned. After Origen’s schools in 3rd century Alexandria and Caesarea, we find in the Eastern Empire, at the beginning of the 4th century, Lucian of Antioch and his disciples.⁴¹ Again one should seriously consider the possibility that they have to be seen as another attempt at realizing the project of a Christian philosophy in the context of a school. Like Justin and his Roman disciples in the 2nd century, and Origen and his Alexandrian disciples in the 3rd century, Lucian and his school were also targeted by a persecution. The master himself was arrested and executed, but not all of his disciples passed the ultimate test.⁴²

Already in the 2nd century, the number and variety of Christian schools are striking. Probably they did not all appeal to the same social stratum;

³⁷⁾ For bibliography on 2nd and 3rd century schools, both gnostic and non-gnostic, see W. Löhr, ‘Das antike Christentum im zweiten Jahrhundert—neue Perspektiven seiner Erforschung’, in: *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 127 (2002) 247–262: 259–261.

³⁸⁾ See, for example, C. Marksches, ‘Valentinian Gnosticism’, in: J.D. Turner /A. McGuire, *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years. Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration*, Nag Hammadi and Manichean Studies XLIV (Leiden 1997) 401–438. See now also I. Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism. Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York 2008).

³⁹⁾ See W. Löhr, ‘Theodotus der Lederarbeiter und Theodotus der Bankier—ein Beitrag zur römischen Theologiegeschichte des 2. und 3. Jahrhunderts’, in: *ZNW* 87 (1996) 101–125.

⁴⁰⁾ See now U. Possehl, ‘Bardaisan of Edessa—Philosopher or Theologian?’, in: *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 10 (2007) 442–461.

⁴¹⁾ Arius famously addressed Eusebius of Nicomedia as a sylloukianista, a ‘fellow disciple of Lucian’ (Epiphanius of Salamis, *Pan.haer.* 69,6,7). For the importance of elite networks based on the ‘condiscipulatus’, see K. Vössing, *Schule und Bildung im Nordafrika der Römischen Kaiserzeit*, Collection Latomus 238 (Brussels 1997), 170–171.

⁴²⁾ Philostorgius, *h.e.* 2, 14.

few if any Christian teachers in the 2nd century will have attracted pupils with Theodore's probable social background. There was fierce disagreement between Christian schools and between master and disciples of the same school.

Debate and Disagreement, however, is exactly what one would expect to find in ancient schools of philosophy. Hilary Armstrong, in a very perceptive paper presented at the International Patristic Conference of 1975, pointed out that for all their acceptance of the authority of Pythagoras, Plato or Aristotle, the philosophical masters of the ancient schools felt free to criticise their teachers. Armstrong wrote:

In studying any philosophical school of our period, especially the Platonic, which was most important and about which we know most, we discover that though the authority of the Founder was absolute, the authority of school tradition was very slight indeed. Ancient philosophical traditionalism was not "scholastic" in any very meaningful sense of the word.⁴³

Our very fragmentary sources reveal little about the inner life and the practices of teaching and learning in the 2nd century schools of Christian philosophy in Rome, Alexandria or elsewhere. Occasionally we can catch a glimpse of this inner life: Irenaeus of Lyon, for example, informs us that the Roman Carpocratians had pictures or statues of Jesus which they venerated and crowned with wreaths alongside pictures of Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle. For the Carpocratians Jesus was clearly an exceptionally wise man. Like Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle, Jesus had had a strong and pure soul that had kept a memory of those ideas it had contemplated before his bodily existence.⁴⁴ Like other philosophical schools, the Roman Carpocratians apparently celebrated their philosopher-heroes.⁴⁵

⁴³) H.A. Armstrong, 'Pagan and Christian Traditionalism in the First Three Centuries', in: *Idem, Hellenic and Christian Studies* (London 1990) IX, 425. See also G. Fowden, 'The Platonist Philosopher and His Circle in Late Antiquity', in: *Philosophia* 7 (1977) 359-383. For a comparison of the doctrinal discontinuities in the Platonic and Valentinian schools, see C. Marksches, *Valentinus Gnosticus?* (Tübingen 1992) 396.

⁴⁴) Irenaeus, haer. 1,25,1. See my comments: W. Löhr, 'Karpokratianisches', in: *Vigiliae Christianae* 49 (1995) 23-48: 24-26.

⁴⁵) This is not to revive Wilamowitz' outdated view that ancient philosophical schools were in fact religious associations (thiasoi), see G.W. Most, 'Philosophy and Religion', in: D. Sedley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Cambridge 2003) 300-322: 320.

If evidence about the inner life of the Christian schools is hard to come by, the same, however, is by and large also true for the Platonic and other schools of the 2nd century.⁴⁶ We have to wait for the 3rd century in order to be offered a more vivid and detailed picture of the inner life of philosophical schools: Theodore and Porphyry celebrate and present their teachers Origen and Plotinus.⁴⁷ And this is no accident. Origen and Plotinus each, in their different ways, could claim to have made a bold and fresh start in, respectively, Christian and Platonic philosophy. For their close disciples, each of them represented a new and charismatic type of philosopher.

The fragmentary evidence of the 2nd century sources and the eloquent testimony of Theodore's *Address* should, however, suffice to dispel the suspicion that any resemblance between these Christian schools and their contemporary Stoic, Epicurean or Platonic counterparts may be due merely to heresiological stereotyping. For example, extant fragments of Valentinus and Basilides show that these two teachers—just like their pagan counterparts—discussed with reference to the bible the question of how the soul is purified, of how one's passions can be mastered.⁴⁸ Isidore, the son and disciple of Basilides, adapted a spiritual exercise from one of the letters of Epicurus.⁴⁹ Or take Origen, almost a century later. The very first sentence of Origen's *opus magnum Peri Archôn* reads thus:

All who believe and are convinced that the grace and the truth came by Jesus Christ (John 1,17), and who know Christ to be the truth (in accordance with his own saying, "I am the truth"/ John 14,6), receive the knowledge which calls men to lead a good and happy life (*ad bene beateque vivendum*) from no other source but the very words and teaching of Christ.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ But see M.-L. Lakmann, *Der Platoniker Tauros in der Darstellung des Aulus Gellius*, *Philosophia Antiqua* 63 (Leiden / New York 1995).

⁴⁷ Apart from the *Life of Plotinus* Porphyry also wrote a *Life of Pythagoras* which formed part of his *Philosophical History* (for the fragments of the Life of Pythagoras, see E. des Places (éd.), *Vie de Pythagore, Lettre à Marcella*, CUFr (Paris 1982); for the few remnants of other books of the *Philosophical History*, see A. Smith, *Porphyrius. Fragments*, BSGRT (Leipzig 1993) 220-249. See now M. Zambon, 'Porfirio biografo di Filosofi', in: A. Monaci Castagno (ed.), *La biografia di Origene fra storia e agiografia* Biblioteca di Adamantius 1 (Villa Verrucchio 2004) 117-142.

⁴⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *str.* 112,1-114,6.

⁴⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *str.* 3,1,1-3,2. See W. Löhr, *Basilides und seine Schule* (Tübingen 1996) 101-122.

⁵⁰ Origenes, *On First Principles* 1,1 (transl. G.W. Butterworth, modified).

For Origen, then, Jesus Christ is a wise master of salvific truth in the philosophical sense. The words of Christ—both of the pre-existent Christ and the incarnate Christ—teach men how to practise a life that leads to the goal of *eudaimonia*. Scripture can be coherently read and interpreted as containing philosophical wisdom. If one takes seriously the first sentence of Origen's *Peri Archôn* one will not assume that Origen's prodigious output as a highly competent exegete of scripture is somehow at odds with his identity as a Christian philosopher. As has been observed by Pierre Hadot and other scholars, it is precisely the exegesis of authoritative scripture that forms the core of the philosophical curriculum in the pagan schools of the second and later centuries. The philosophical master taught philosophy mainly by commenting on the writings of the old masters and by answering questions of the disciples. In the Christian schools, the works of Plato, Aristotle or Chrysippus were replaced by the Jewish bible, the gospels and the letters of Paul. For example, whereas the Platonists explained the *Timaios*, a Christian school teacher may have explained the first chapter of the book of Genesis.⁵¹ Of course, as a Stoic philosopher may occasionally also read a treatise of Aristotle with his disciples, a Christian philosopher may have also commented on Plato or other philosophers.

For Christianity, the legacy of this early exegetical work of the Christian schools was invaluable. In the 2nd century the Alexandrian teacher Basilides and the Valentinian Herakleon wrote the first commentaries on the gospels. Like other professional philosophers Origen had worked as a grammarian and was therefore well versed in textual criticism and philology. With his *Hexapla* he realized a philological project whose scope and ambition easily surpassed the earlier work of Alexandrian Homer philology. Origen's impressive philological and exegetical work was continued by his disciple Pamphilus and by Pamphilus' disciple Eusebius of Caesarea. Third century Platonists like Longinus or Porphyry also excelled in philological and historical work. Porphyry wrote a *Philosophical History* whose first part contained a discussion of chronology.⁵² And of course, Porphyry accomplished the scholarly feat of correctly determining the date of the book of Daniel. Perhaps one could say that the 3rd century saw a flourishing of philosophical philology—a consequence of the exegetical turn the philosophical schools had taken since the 2nd century.

⁵¹ See now C. Köckert, *Christliche Kosmologie und antike Naturphilosophie*, Diss.theol. Hamburg 2007 (will be published).

⁵² M. Zambon, 'Porfirio biografo di filosofi' (see note 47) 119.

It is my impression that these and other resemblances between the intellectual practices of the Christian schools of philosophy and their pagan counterparts are often not taken seriously enough and are explained in terms of a more or less superficial accommodation. In the second century, it is said, Christianity began to address its message to the tiny educated elite. In doing so, Christianity cast itself as a philosophy, assumed so to say, the trappings of a philosophy, tried to speak in terms and concepts that translated the alien and complex language of the bible into an idiom an educated Roman or Greek could understand. Ulrich Neymeyr, in his fine monograph *Die christlichen Lehrer im zweiten Jahrhundert. Ihre Lehrtätigkeit, ihr Selbstverständnis und ihre Geschichte*⁵³ concedes that Christian teachers like Justin or Clement of Alexandria have so much in common with contemporary teachers of philosophy that they are almost indistinguishable from them.⁵⁴ And yet Neymeyr tries to look for characteristic differences between these two groups: Christian teachers were different, he claims, because they took no money but hoped for eternal rewards instead, because they wrote more, because they were more engaged in protreptic exhortation, because they wanted to lead their disciples to salvation, because they conceived of themselves as charismatics.

It is doubtful whether this list of distinguishing characteristics would equally apply to all teachers of Christian philosophy. The spectrum of Christian teachers and schools, their attitudes and their practices was probably as broad and as varied as that of pagan teachers and schools. It is not always clear what scholars who determine the relation between 2nd century Christianity and philosophy as an 'accommodation' precisely mean to say.

If they wish to suggest that some of the most fertile minds of 2nd and 3rd century Christianity were engaged in a vast exercise of intellectual mimicry, they are, I believe, quite wrong. If, alternatively, they wish to suggest that the project of teaching Christianity as a philosophy was intrinsically impossible (because Christianity is a religion and therefore something essentially different from philosophy), they make, in effect, a philosophical or theological, not a historical, judgement.

⁵³) Leiden 1989.

⁵⁴) Neymeyr, *Die christlichen Lehrer* (Leiden 1989), 227-228.

IV

To conceive of Christianity as a philosophy was an intellectual project that needed careful positioning in its contemporary intellectual environment. First of all, with this self definition, 2nd century Christianity entered an already very crowded market. Christian philosophy had to compete with other schools of philosophy (Stoics, Platonists, Peripatetics and Epicureans) which offered both theoretical knowledge and a perspective on life as a whole, a philosophical way of life. Various intellectual strategies were devised to define one's own position with regard to this plurality of philosophies: Justin Martyr, for example, claimed that originally, before the emergence of various schools that contradicted each other, philosophy had been a gift from heaven, had been one and undivided.⁵⁵ Justin distinguishes between so to say, the original intention of philosophy—the one and undivided search for truth—and its betrayal and adulteration by the scholasticism of various schools that no longer care about the truth but only defend their own prestige and reputation. Justin here rehearses an anti-scholastic argument that could also be found in the pagan schools of philosophy. Christian philosophy, the only true philosophy, Justin claimed, recovers the ancient and unitary truth which is to be found already in the OT prophets and then in the teaching of Jesus Christ. Christ is the beginning and end of the search for truth that is the hallmark of true philosophy.⁵⁶

Justin, however, was keenly aware of the fact that the plurality of the pagan schools of philosophy was only mirrored by the plurality of the Christian schools. It was Justin who invented heresiology—the definition, classification and denunciation of Christian difference, a new form of knowledge with a potent legacy for the Christianity of later centuries. Origen's position towards the plurality of philosophical schools and Christian sects was considerable more complex than Justin's. Responding to Celsus, Origen writes:

Any teaching which has had a serious origin, and is beneficial to life, has caused different sects.⁵⁷

⁵⁵) Justin, *dial.* 2,1-2.

⁵⁶) Alain Le Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie dans la littérature grecque II^e-III^e siècle*, Études augustinienes (Paris 1985) t. I, 57-8.

⁵⁷) Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3, 12 (this and the following quotation are taken from H. Chadwick's translation).

And Origen—who is here clearly instructed by 1 Cor 11,19—points out that there are not only several philosophical schools, but also several schools of medicine:

The sects in medicine would be no good reason for avoiding it; nor would anyone who was endeavouring to act rightly hate philosophy, alleging the existence of many sects as an excuse for his hatred of it.

In his school in Caesarea Origen had incorporated the plurality of philosophical schools into his curriculum. He introduced his disciples to the writings of the various Greek philosophers and poets—except those of the atheists (i.e. the Atomists or the Epicureans).⁵⁸ However, Origen enjoined his disciples not to pass premature judgements on the various philosophical views and systems. In his *Address* Theodore spells out the rationale of this critical *epochê*: The souls of the disciples should not be seduced by the rhetoric and the specious sophisms of various schools.⁵⁹ Otherwise they would no longer be open to arguments, they would fall prey to irrationality and thus miss the very goal of a philosophical education. For Theodore, then, it is not so much the plurality of schools that endangers the philosophical project, but their irrational dogmatism. Jaap Mansfeld has pointed out that the same kind of psychagogic eclecticism can be found in Galen: On the hand the great philosopher physician wanted his students to become acquainted with the teaching of all the principal sects in medicine. On the other hand he wished ‘his students to free themselves from the irrational passions which are inevitably bound up with the feelings of loyalty to a particular school, or sect.’⁶⁰ Of course, Origen’s crash course in various philosophies was also simply useful; it introduced Theodore—who until then had been uninterested in philosophy⁶¹—to a whole range of philosophical views. To some extent, then, the eclecticism of Origen’s curriculum integrated the fragmented philosophical spectrum of Hellenistic philosophy. In this way Origen is able to underline his claim to overcome and replace the spectrum of Greek philosophy and its divisions. The Neoplatonic schools tried to achieve the same by other means.

⁵⁸) Gregory, *Address* XIII, 151-152.

⁵⁹) Gregory, *Address* XIII, 153-157.

⁶⁰) J. Mansfeld, *Prolegomena. Questions to be Settled before the Study of an Author or a Text* (Leiden etc., 1994) 165 (with references).

⁶¹) Gregory, *Address* XI, 133-135.

Apart from their eclecticism, a second characteristic of some Christian schools is their traditionalism and connected to this, their claim to represent ancient wisdom. The Christian schools developed this characteristic partly in competition with the traditionalism of the Platonic schools. Michael Erler has recently illuminated this Platonic recourse to ancient esoteric wisdom.⁶² Already Plato had started from the hermeneutic assumption that the old *logoi* (old accounts) contain wisdom and truth. He believed that philosophy had the task of faithfully reconstructing this old and ancient truth, of showing why it is reasonable to accept its authority. Some Platonists of the 2nd and 3rd century adopted Plato's attitude. They explored the ancient wisdom of the oldest and wisest men and nations. The Greek poets were mined, as were Orphic utterings or—from the late 2nd century—Chaldaean oracles. It is important to realize that Christian philosophers and Platonic philosophers did not greatly differ in their attitude towards ancient and authoritative religious wisdom. Both versions of ancient philosophy relied on authoritative wisdom, quoted it and explained it.⁶³ Both, however, also insisted that this wisdom can and must be understood, can and must be reconstructed and comprehended by reason.

In order to counter Platonic traditionalism, Christian philosophers like Justin Martyr could lay claim to the wisdom of the Old Testament. Bold and aggressive hermeneutics were proposed. One could argue that Justin's concept of Logos theology had a primarily hermeneutical focus. It is Christ the pre-existent Logos of God, Justin claimed, that communicated divine wisdom in the Old Testament.⁶⁴ Moreover, any fragment of truth in the pagan philosophical schools had been taken from the wisdom communicated by God's Logos, God's Word—in this view, Sokrates and Herakleitos are as much Christians as the OT prophets Micah and Elia—they all participated in the Logos and lived accordingly.⁶⁵ In order to demonstrate (*apodeixis*) the truth of his Christian philosophical hermeneutics, Justin

⁶² Michael Erler, 'Legitimation und Projektion: Die „Weisheit der Alten“ im Platonismus der Spätantike', in: D. Kuhn / H. Stahl (Hrsg.), *Die Gegenwart des Altertums. Formen und Funktionen des Altertumsbezugs in den Hochkulturen der Alten Welt* (Heidelberg 2001) 313-326.

⁶³ For perceptive remarks on the doctrinaire character of later Platonism, see M. Baltes, 'Was ist antiker Platonismus?', in: *Studia Patristica* 24 (Leuven 1993) 233.

⁶⁴ See M.J. Edwards, 'Justin's Logos and the Word of God', in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3,3 (1995) 261-280.

⁶⁵ Justin, *1 apol.* 46.

Martyr had to refute a Jewish hermeneutics that refuses to read Jewish Scripture as a revelation of the pre-existent Christ—Logos.⁶⁶

Even some of those schools of Christian philosophy that stopped short of a wholesale acceptance of the Jewish bible as Christian Scripture (the so called Gnostics) found it important to lay claim to ancient wisdom. If Platonic philosophers like Celsus propagated the true wisdom of ancient sages like Pythagoras or Pherekydes, Isidor, the son of the Christian teacher Basilides argued that Pherekydes was drawing his wisdom from a still earlier source, the prophet Ham.⁶⁷

The masters of third century philosophy, well versed in history and philology, were more critical towards such claims. Origen implicitly rejected the more primitive versions of the theory of a theft of the Greeks.⁶⁸ And in the Roman school of Plotinus, the disciples Amelius and Porphyry had the task of refuting and exposing those forged prophetic texts that were cited by the Gnostics.⁶⁹

Apart from traditionalism and eclecticism there is a third characteristic of ancient Christian philosophy that is often cited: This is its practical emphasis and connected to this—what one may call for want of a better word—its democratic attitude. Alexander of Lycopolis, a teacher of philosophy, writing at the close of the 3rd century, characterised Christian philosophy as focussed on moral exhortation, as simple and unsophisticated.⁷⁰ Origen and other Christian writers seem to confirm this view from outside. Responding to Celsus's claim that Christianity is the religion for the uneducated, Origen extols the demotic appeal of Christianity and sharply criticises the cultural and social exclusiveness of contemporary Platonism.⁷¹ Later, in the fourth and following centuries, the practical and theory-averse asceticism of Christian monks and ascetics claimed to represent the *philosophikos bios*. However, it would be wrong to apply this general characterisation of Christianity as practical philosophy to the activities of particular Christian schools of philosophy. Valentinus and his disciples

⁶⁶ Justin, *dial.* 11,5.

⁶⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *str.* 6,53,5.

⁶⁸ In *Contra Celsum* 6,43 Origen seems to argue that Pherecydes is dependent on Moses.

⁶⁹ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 16. See A. Grafton, *Forgers and Critics. Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton 1990).

⁷⁰ Alexander of Lycopolis, *Against the teaching of Mani* 1 (Ed. A. Brinkmann 3 / French translation: A. Villey, *Alexandre de Lycopolis, Contre la doctrine de Mani* (Paris 1985) 56 (I am grateful to Charlotte Köckert for this reference).

⁷¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6,1.

were deeply engaged in theoretical debates about the details of their system. One of them, Ptolemy, wrote the famous *Letter to Flora*, which is in effect an introduction (*eisagogê*) to his system.⁷² Origen, sketching the outlines of his system in *Peri Archôn*, repeatedly indicates those points where further exploration and discussion is needed.⁷³ The Valentinian system and Origen's system were the two most sophisticated attempts at creating a theoretically coherent religious philosophy in the history of Ancient Christianity. It is no accident that these two systems were elaborated and refined in a school context. Both schools invented a characteristic terminology.⁷⁴

One could say, that for Ancient Christianity, the Christian schools of the 2nd and 3rd century functioned as a kind of theological laboratory; here—and this was already glimpsed by A.v. Harnack⁷⁵—a good deal of the arguments and the terminology of the doctrinal debates of the 4th and 5th centuries was first coined and tested.

V

When Augustine began to study rhetoric in Carthage, he and his parents cherished the same ambition as Theodore and his family more than a century before Augustine wished to become an advocate in the law courts.⁷⁶ With some luck, even high administrative office ('the governorship of a small province') would not be out of reach. As is well known, when he was 18, during his rhetorical studies, Augustine came across Cicero's dialogue *Hortensius*—a protreptic, an exhortation to study philosophy. Following the exhortation of the *Hortensius*, Augustine turned first to scripture, and then, after a very frustrating failure to understand it, to the wisdom offered by the Manicheans. Surprisingly few scholars have wondered about the

⁷² See W. Löhr, 'Ptolemäus', in: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 27 (Berlin 1997) 699-702.

⁷³ Origen, *On First Principles*, preface 8-10 sketches a research program.

⁷⁴ Compare M. Baltes, 'Was ist antiker Platonismus?', in: *Studia Patristica* 24 (Leuven 1993) 219-238 who highlights the emergence of a Platonic system that could be taught and transmitted. The construction of philosophical systems (Platonic, Valentinian, Origenist) and the exegetical turn of ancient philosophy are probably closely related. The philosophical system could provide a hermeneutical horizon that made possible a flourishing exegetical practice.

⁷⁵ A. von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*. Zweiter Band: *Die Entwicklung des kirchlichen Dogmas I* (Tübingen 41909 = Darmstadt 1964) 196-197 comments on the Valentinian background of the Arian controversy.

⁷⁶ Augustine, *Confessions* 3,3,6 (H. Chadwick's translation is used throughout).

young Augustine's response to the invitation of the *Hortensius*. Why did he not—like Theodore a hundred years before—join a philosophical school? We know that in the big city of Carthage quite a number of teachers of philosophy were active in Augustine's time.⁷⁷

Perhaps one might argue that for the young Augustine it was precisely Manichaeism that functioned as a kind of Christian philosophy. Western Manichaeans surely claimed to teach true Christianity. Moreover, with its combination of dialectic skill (as displayed in staged disputations), close and critical exegesis of scripture, a comprehensive and allegedly scientific account of reality (the Manichean system, or in philosophical parlance: physics) and a strict asceticism, Manichaeism could be viewed as a late antique surrogate philosophy. But—as the young Augustine was to discover—Manichaeism was intellectually deficient, its doctrines could not be accommodated within the framework of late antique *paideia*. Even its prominent protagonists like Faustus lacked a thorough grounding in the liberal arts.⁷⁸

Clearly, it might have been difficult for Augustine to finance his philosophical studies. His parents even lacked the funds fully to pay for his training in rhetoric. Ilsetraut Hadot believes that Augustine also may have objected against studying with a pagan teacher of philosophy.⁷⁹

What Theodore learned in the school of Origen, Augustine had to teach himself mainly by reading books. About a year after encountering the *Hortensius*, Augustine came across a Latin translation of the *Categories* of Aristotle. Augustine claims to have understood this work without any help. In the same autodidactic manner Augustine also studied the philosophical disciplines of mathematics and astronomy, in order to refute the astrological speculations of the Manichaeans.⁸⁰ And then, in Milan and many years later, certain books of philosophy, the much discussed *libri Platoniorum*

⁷⁷ K. Vössing, *Schule und Bildung im Nordafrika der Römischen Kaiserzeit*, Collection Latomus 238 (Brussels 1997) 400–404. However, as Vössing points out, there is no evidence that in Africa philosophical teachers were supported by either the cities or the emperor. This seems to indicate a rather low public standing of philosophy and its practitioners in Roman Africa.

⁷⁸ Augustine, *Confessions* 5,6,11.

⁷⁹ I. Hadot, 'La formation d'Augustin. Le cursus d'études d'Augustin et la question des arts libéraux', in: *Eadem, Arts libéraux et philosophie dans la pensée antique* (Paris 2005) 379–81.

⁸⁰ Augustine, *Confessions* 4,16,28,30.

were given to him. Addressing his friend Romanianus, Augustin evokes this overwhelming experience in *Contra Academicos*:

We did not think about anything except that way of life (philosophy!), a way of life both appropriate and suitable for us. We thought about it constantly. Yet we were not as passionate as we might have been... We had not yet been touched by the greatest flame, the flame that was to consume us. (...) But look! When certain books brimming full (as Celsinus says) wafted their exotic scents to us and when a few drops of their precious perfume trickled unto that meagre flame, they burst into an unbelievable conflagration—unbelievable Romanus, unbelievable, beyond what perhaps even you believe of me...even beyond what I believe of myself...⁸¹

Clearly, for Augustine, the *libri Platoniorum* (as he was to call these books in the *Confessions*) contained a piece of very effective exhortation to a philosophical life. For Theodore, more than a hundred years before Augustine, it was the eloquent presence of Origen himself that had achieved the conversion. Augustine relates his conversion with explicit protreptic intent: He wants his addressee Romanianus also to convert to philosophy, to shed his ties to the Manicheans and to retreat from a distracting law suit.

The reading of the Platonic books admonished Augustine to return to himself and consequently also—as he put it—‘to the religion implanted in us as boys, binding us from the marrow’, to the only religion he knew. He felt called to test his religion:

And so stumbling, hastening, hesitating I snatched up the Apostle Paul. Truly, I declared, they (i.e. the apostles) would not have been able to do such great deeds, nor would they have lived as they clearly did live, if their books and arguments were opposed to so great a good.

A lot of scholarly ink has been spilt on these few words. The proven asceticism and the missionary deeds of Paul and the other apostles encouraged Augustine to interpret their writings in the light of the wisdom of Plotinus. For Augustine, then, there was one transcendent and eternal truth to which he was converted by the *libri Platoniorum* and with which the letters of Paul did not disagree. It is Augustine, the curious reader, who—crossing

⁸¹) Augustine, *Contra Academicos* 2,2,5 (here and in the following I use the translation of P. King, *Augustine: Against the Academicians and The Teacher* [Indianapolis / Cambridge 1995] 29-31). I disagree with the interpretation proposed by T. Fuhrer, *Augustin. Contra Academicos* (Berlin / New York 1997) 88-106.

boundaries—in his mind combines Paul and Plotinus. Augustine's intellectual patchwork reconstitutes ancient philosophy's original project and its unity of discourse and *mode de vie*.

Augustine's conversion to the transcendent truth of philosophy was not mediated by a philosophical master but by books.⁸² He read Cicero, Aristotle, Plotinus or Porphyry on his own, without exegetical help, outside a school and its carefully constructed curriculum. Of course, in Milan Augustine had met educated Christians with whom he could discuss his Platonic reading—the importance of these intellectual contacts should not be underrated.⁸³

Converted and admonished by his reading of the Platonic books, Augustine attempted the ascent to God well before he had made the first step of every serious course of philosophy, i.e. before he had begun to master his passions, to purify his soul. The masters of the Neoplatonic schools, Iamblichus or Proclus, would probably have viewed this unconventional attempt at climbing the summit of philosophical contemplation as an example of 'do it yourself philosophy' at its worst.

Moreover, the episode of Augustine's conversion by the *libri Platoniorum* could alert us to the hazards of the transmission and reception of ancient philosophy. Of course, Augustin could have learned from Origen instead of Plotinus about the transcendent, incorporeal being of God. But the texts of Christian philosophy of an earlier age, particularly the bulk of the works of Origen, began to become available in translation only about ten years later, through the labours of Rufinus and Jerome.⁸⁴ In Milan, in 386, Augustine had access to this earlier tradition of Christian and Jewish philosophy only through its refraction in the preaching of Ambrose who drew copiously on Philo and Origen. Clearly, given the very fragility of

⁸² See R. Lane Fox, 'Movers and Shakers', in: A. Smith (ed.), *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity. Essays in Honour of Peter Brown* (Swansea 2005) 19-50: 27-28.

⁸³ Perhaps Ambrose and certainly Manlius Theodorus (*De beata vita* 1,4) played a role in alerting Augustine to the treatises of Plotinus. Simplician made Augustin see the harmony between Neoplatonic philosophy and the prologue of the Gospel of John, see *De Civitate Dei* 10,29,2. See P. Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris ²1968) 93-138; 153-156; 168-174. See also S. Lancel, *Saint Augustin* (Paris 1999) 123-126 (with bibliography).

⁸⁴ There is no need to endorse Györgi Heidl's ingeniously argued claim that the *libri* mentioned in *Contra Academicos* 2,2,5 are Origen's commentary on the Song of Songs, see his *Origen's Influence on the Young Augustine* (Piscataway/ NJ 2007).

the transmission and dissemination of any knowledge in Late Antiquity, Origen's Christian philosophy had so far failed to define a new Christian discourse about God. Origen's Christian philosophy was elitist, it was known to the few, not the many.

Book VIII of Augustine's *Confessions* contains surely the most extended and most sophisticated late antique exploration of the phenomenon of conversion. Here Augustine does not present conversions to intense, ascetic Christianity as enthusiastic responses to a carefully attuned protreptic or as a gradual progress directed by a spiritual guide and friend in the context of a philosophical school. He rather views them as sudden events at the end of a lengthy and tortuous process of reflection and self examination. They seem to come out of the blue, triggered by chancing across the *Life of Antony* in a monastic house before the walls of Trier, or by a children's voice in a garden in Milan. De-contextualized and miscellaneous reading, discontinuous biographies and sudden conversions: Augustine's engagement with philosophy was clearly different from Theodore's experience in Origen's school a hundred years earlier. When Augustine wrote the *Confessions*, he no longer believed in the supreme value of rhetoric, the liberal arts or philosophy. Accordingly, in the *Confessions* the description of the overwhelming impact of the *libri Platoniorum* is rather muted. Augustin no longer believed that philosophy as a way of life offered privileged access to the goal of human existence. But then, of course, a Plotinus, a Porphyry, or even an Origen, would have probably argued that Augustine had never been a true believer, a true devotee of the project of ancient philosophy, in the first place.

VI

Augustine's intellectual biography is unique. But perhaps his peculiar kind of engagement—or non engagement—with the project of ancient philosophy has wider significance. By the 4th century, the Christian schools of philosophy began to disappear. In Rome, the schools probably did not survive the 3rd century. In the East, apart from Didymus the Blind in Alexandria (he commented not only biblical books but also Origen's *Peri Archôn*),⁸⁵ there were, of course, Aetios and Eunomios, the two so called

⁸⁵) According to a manuscript in Oxford, the Codex Baroccianus 142, fol. 216, the 4th century historian Philippus of Side constructed the *diadochê* of the Alexandrian

‘Neoarian’ theologians. They can arguably be viewed as the Christian counterparts of those pagan sophists whose biographies were recorded by Eunapios of Sardes. Like Eunapios and some other pagan sophists of the 4th century, Aetios also practiced medicine, without accepting any fee, in order to be able ‘to heal not only the maladies of the soul, but also of the body.’⁸⁶

Some of the Gnostic schools of the 2nd and 3rd century must have survived—Aetius demonstrated his rhetorical prowess in disputations with Gnostics—but they had become small, sectarian groups with little outside appeal or impact. When Basil of Caesarea and his friend Gregory of Nazianzen wished to study Christian philosophy, they resorted to the work of Origen. They helped themselves by composing a collection of excerpts from Origen’s writings (the *Philocalia*). But the dissemination of Origen’s Christian philosophy ran into difficulties. Origen’s teaching had aroused suspicion already in the 3rd century. At the close of the 4th century, new opposition against his version of Christian philosophy emerged. And the translation of his works into Latin caused much acrimony. The difficulties of the intellectual legacy of Origen signals the demise of the most ambitious version of the ancient project of teaching Christianity as a philosophy. Origen’s exploratory, tentative way of doing theology was no longer appreciated.

The most notorious reason for the gradual disappearance of the Christian schools of philosophy is the enhanced role of the Christian bishops. The bishops tended to centralize and monopolize the articulation of Christian doctrine. Origen’s career neatly illustrates the point. Eusebius of Caesarea inherited Origen’s library, not his school. The more ambitious pupils of Lucian apparently also ended as bishops, not as teachers. Even the Christian sophists Aetius and Eunomios made abortive attempts to obtain clerical office. General and local councils established a more and more explicit orthodoxy which became legally enforceable. The plurality of Christian schools disappeared. The laboratory of Christian theology was shut down. Richard Goulet has tried to argue that the 4th century saw a

didaskaleion—a testimony of doubtful value. But see B. Pouderon, ‘Athénagore chef d’école. A propos du témoignage de Phillipe de Sidè’, in: *Studia Patristica* 26 (Leuven 1993), 167–176.

⁸⁶ Philostorgius, *h.e.* 3,15. See L. Cracco Ruggini, ‘Iatrosostica pagana, ‘filosofia’ cristiana e medicina (IV–VI secolo)’, in: F. Chausson / E. Wolf, *Consuetudinis amor. Fragments d’histoire romaine (II^e–VI^e siècles) offerts à Jean-Pierre Callu* (Roma 2003) 189–216.

general decline in the social prestige of philosophical teaching. It is difficult to verify this hypothesis on the basis of the slender evidence so far presented by Goulet.⁸⁷ If he is right, however, the demise of the Christian schools must be seen as part of a larger process. The Platonic schools in Alexandria, Athens, Aphrodisias and elsewhere certainly survived and even flourished. These schools found partly a new role as the guardians of the cultural and religious heritage of Hellenism. Their heads often doubled as priests in various cults.⁸⁸

Whatever Christian bishops or zealous monks might wish or say, the educated Christian laity, in so far as it was interested in philosophy at all, continued to read Plato, Aristotle or Cicero or send their sons to the pagan Platonic schools. In late 5th century Alexandria the lectures of the Platonic philosopher Ammonios and his colleagues were also followed by Christian students. Did Ammonios distinguish more clearly between philosophy and theology, spiritual exercises and pagan cult observance? Was he perhaps forced to enter into an agreement with the Christian bishop Peter Mongus which banned religious activities from his schools? Or was he asked to drop controversial doctrines like the eternity of the world from the curriculum of his school? These and other important questions are discussed by the recent monograph of Edward J. Watts.⁸⁹

VII

By way of conclusion two brief remarks:

1. Pierre Hadot has argued that it was the triumph of Christian philosophy that in effect sealed the fate of the original project of ancient philosophy. I would like to suggest that an important element is lacking in this narrative: The demise of the Christian schools of philosophy. In the 4th, 5th and 6th century, the impressive scholasticism of the late antique Platonic schools in Athens and Alexandria found no Christian counterpart. No comparable Valentinian or Origenist scholasticism was established. Christian Philosophy had failed

⁸⁷ R. Goulet, 'Les intellectuels païens dans l'empire Chrétien', in: Idem, *Études sur les Vies des philosophes de l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris 2001) 373-386: 378-379.

⁸⁸ See P. Zanker, *The mask of Socrates* (note 12), 310-3111.

⁸⁹ *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkeley / Los Angeles 2006).

to develop a comprehensive alternative to the pagan philosophical schools. It remained an unfinished project, a never completely fulfilled ambition.

2. This left those Christians who were interested in philosophy with the following alternative: They could either read Plato or Aristotle or Porphyry or Proclus, by themselves, outside a proper philosophical school.⁹⁰ Or they could frequent a school of pagan philosophy (as in Alexandria). Philosophy—both Christian and non Christian—as transmitted by books became fragmented and de-contextualized. This seems like a natural, if extreme, consequence of the exegetical turn of ancient philosophy since the 2nd century.

Divorced from philosophical practice, fragmented and de-contextualized philosophy could be put to new uses: Christian intellectuals like Boethius or John Philopon employed it in order to reconstruct the Christian dogma with the help of Aristotelian terminology. Once the more ambitious project of coherently interpreting Christianity as a philosophy had, in effect, been abandoned, there was also room for new definitions of the relation between Christianity and philosophical enquiry—both in theory and in practice. Synesios of Cyrene presents the extreme case of a Neoplatonic re-definition of this relation. Sometimes this new relation seemed ill defined, or a non-relation, a simple juxtaposition of both: Boethius' '*De consolazione philosophiae*' may be a case in point.⁹¹

⁹⁰) Some—but by no means all or even most—monastic communities also had an intellectual life that—sometimes guided by the works of Origen and his followers—focussed on the spiritual exegesis of scripture. But despite certain continuities between philosophical schools and monastic communities and despite the monastic claim to practice a *philosophikos bios* the differences should not be downplayed.

⁹¹) See J. Marenbon, *Boethius* (Oxford 2003), 162. It is, of course, entirely plausible to assume that already in the 2nd and 3rd centuries there must have been Christians who taught, say, Aristotelian or Platonic, not Christian, philosophy. A certain Anatolius may have been such a philosopher, see Eusebius, *b.e.* 7, 32, 6. It is always wrong to conceive of the intellectual life of any period as a teleological process with a single trajectory. Neither does Late Antiquity offer the example of an inevitable and progressive Christianization of the intellectual life, nor does the Modern Age present us with an inevitable and progressive dissociation of Christianity and high intellectual endeavour. Rather, with the advent of Christianity, new intellectual problems and configurations arose, and a novel interplay between religion and philosophy.

A modern theologian may still come to the conclusion that the ancient project of interpreting Christianity as a philosophy was ultimately a misconceived and impossible intellectual endeavour. Such a position could cite ancient authorities, both pagan and Christian. But perhaps even modern theology may be inspired by the recognition that one of the origins of early Christian theology is the intense philosophical search for the goal of human life, for the full realization of humanity.

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